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SUBJECT: LIBERIA: GOL CONSULTS CITIZENS ON POVERTY
REDUCTION STRATEGY

¶1. (U) SUMMARY. Liberians want roads, healthcare, and education, and they still don't feel secure. The GOL held two-day consultations with stakeholders in each of Liberia's 15 counties as part of the Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) process. For the first time, Liberians nationwide had a chance to contribute to the national development strategy. Embassy staff, including USAID, observed consultations in five counties, and it is clear the GOL's goals reflect Liberians' priorities. Now it must deliver. Although the process was not perfect (it was very much top-down, guided from Monrovia), these PRS consultations were a milestone in Liberia's recovery from conflict to participatory democracy. The GOL plans to post the full report on the county consultations on the Executive Mansion's website (<http://www.emansion.gov.lr>). END SUMMARY.

THE COUNTY CONSULTATION PROCESS

¶2. (U) The GOL is developing a Poverty Reduction Strategy as part of its HIPC debt relief effort. GOL ministries, led by President Sirleaf and joined by donors and civil society, have focused on four "pillars": Security; Economic Revitalization; Governance-Rule of Law; and Infrastructure-Basic Services. In preparation for the consultations in each county, which took place between October and December, each pillar coordinated questions to be asked at each consultation. The results, supported by the census that started December 17, will inform the GOL's priorities for poverty reduction. Embassy staff, including USAID, attended consultations in five of the 15 counties: Grand Cape Mount on the Sierra Leone border, Sinoe, Grand Kru and Maryland near Cote d'Ivoire, and Montserrado County, which includes Monrovia. We also exchanged views with participants and other partners, particularly the UN.

¶3. (U) These first-ever national consultations presented a logistical challenge. Transportation is extremely difficult, with some counties unreachable by road. There is no national phone system. Most Liberians are illiterate. However, with strong logistical support from UNMIL, the GOL sent top officials, with representatives from each pillar, to meet with 100 invited participants in each county. Participants, who included local elected officials, traditional leaders, and representatives of local NGOs, met the first day to set county priorities, then shared those views with the GOL representatives the second day. Participants were divided into separate groups of men, women, youth and elders, which was found to facilitate the most open discussion. Each pillar facilitator met in sequence with each demographic group, with results reported at a final plenary session. The call for roads, healthcare and education was consistent nationwide.

THE PROS OUTWEIGHED THE CONS

¶4. (U) The consultations led to discussions of topics that are rarely addressed in public forums: how to re-integrate ex-combatants; who has access to land; do you trust the security forces; which roads would make the most difference; why aren't children in school? The initiative provided a showcase for new GOL initiatives (local consultations before granting mining concessions), educated the public (there's a new anti-rape law; children should be in school), and raised expectations. The GOL can now be held accountable. The government also has more credibility in setting policy, as it can refer to public demand.

¶5. (SBU) However, despite improvements as the consultations proceeded, the process was not perfect. Perhaps by necessity, the process was top-down. Participants, who included elected officials, traditional leaders and NGO representatives, were for the most part selected and invited by the national government, in an effort to ensure a broad representation and diversity. The pillar facilitators were of uneven quality, with some asking leading questions or lecturing. Given the liveliness of many of the discussions and poor acoustics of some venues, it is unlikely note takers were able to capture every nuance.

PILLAR-SPECIFIC POINTS

¶6. (U) On the first day, the groups worked together to develop a County Vision Statement using the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) process. On the second day, they discussed the four pillars of Liberia's PRS -- Security, Economic Revitalization, Governance-Rule of Law, and Infrastructure and Basic Services -- and determined the

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priority needs of their county development strategy with respect to each pillar. It was clear that Liberians need more and better roads, security, education, and healthcare.

SECURITY PILLAR

¶7. (U) It is clear that security gaps remain of deep concern to Liberians, and that weaknesses in the rule of law sector are increasingly recognized as core problems for local and national security. Many counties identified the inadequate number of police officers, the lack of police resources, and corruption as the biggest obstacles to security. Citizens suggested the GOL deploy and train more police officers -- especially women -- in rural areas, with more emphasis on human rights and public relations training. Other suggestions included:

- strengthen the judicial system;
- ensure the Armed Forces of Liberia includes all tribes; (Note: The AFL is very representative of the ethnic make up of the country. End note.)
- build more corrections/detention facilities, especially for juveniles;
- provide more training to reintegrate ex-combatants; and
- improve control of the land borders.

ECONOMIC REVITALIZATION PILLAR

¶8. (U) Liberians recognize their country's tremendous economic potential, especially in agriculture, mining, fisheries, and eventually tourism, but illiteracy, illness, and poor security, and infrastructure remain constraints. Lack of roads was consistently identified as the primary obstacle to economic growth, though other challenges are also problematic. Uncertain land tenure hinders agriculture, mining, and access to credit. Lack of security and the absence of financial institutions make access to and transport of cash difficult and sometimes dangerous. Most counties do not have a bank, a post office, electricity, or

phone communication outside the county capital.

GOVERNANCE AND RULE OF LAW PILLAR

¶9. (U) The judicial system was universally considered dysfunctional, leading people to resort to traditional justice such as trial-by-ordeal and mob violence, and undermining the ability to achieve lasting security. There are too few judges or competent lawyers, and the system is slow and corrupt. Defendants routinely spend more time in prison awaiting trial than they would if they were tried, convicted, and served their sentence. Government officials at all levels are corrupt and are not held accountable. Some counties also called for the immediate election of officials such as county superintendents (the highest government official in the county), who are now appointed by the President. Counties also hope decentralization will give them more control over fiscal resources.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND BASIC SERVICES PILLAR

¶10. (U) Roads and bridges are the most pressing infrastructure priority. Virtually all counties cited a lack of trained teachers, especially female teachers. Communities need more schools, and more adult education programs. Health clinics do not have resident doctors or other trained health professionals. (Note: There are an estimated 150 doctors in Liberia, half of them foreign. About a third of the Liberian doctors are teaching, retired, or otherwise not practicing medicine. End note.) Often patients do not survive long trips to seek health care. The lack of sanitation and access to safe drinking water was a serious concern. In some counties, there is no electricity or telephone networks and residents requested GOL assistance in getting cell phone coverage.

¶11. (SBU) COMMENT. Although the consultations were not perfect, the GOL deserves praise for taking a strong step towards participatory democracy. For the first time in Liberia's history, ordinary Liberians throughout the country were able to engage their leaders; and it appeared the leaders were listening. By sending high-ranking officials, including cabinet ministers, to talk to citizens, solicit their views, and describe the government's goals, the Sirleaf Administration has given notice that citizens have a voice, and a responsibility to hold their government accountable. Despite the shortcomings, the PRS consultations engaged a wide swath of Liberian society in serious discussion of the

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future of their country. The message was clear: the GOL has accurately captured the major national priorities, but there is regional variation that must be considered.
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